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The Magician's Tea-Party

Evelyn Sharp

Little King Wistful slipped through the palace gates and went out into his kingdom to look for something new. He was only eight years old, so he was not a very big King; but he had been King as long as he could remember, and he had been looking for something new the whole time. Now, his kingdom was entirely made of islands, and in the days when the old King and Queen were alive these islands were known as the Cheerful Isles. But King Wistful changed their name soon after he came to the throne, and insisted on their being called the Monotonous Isles. For, strange as it may sound, this little King of eight years old thought his kingdom was the dullest and the ugliest and the most wearisome place in the world, and nothing that his nurses or his councillors could do ever succeeded in making him laugh and play like other little boys.

"Only look at the stupid things!" muttered his Majesty impatiently, as he stood and surveyed his kingdom from the top of a small, grassy hillock. "Five round islands in a row; always five round islands in a row! If only some of them were square, it would be something!"

At the bottom of the hill was a wood, one of those pale-green baby woods, where the trees are young and slender and nothing grows very plentifully except the bracken and the heather. And as the King stood and felt sorry for himself at the top of the hill, out from the wood at the bottom of the hill came the sound of a little girl's voice, singing a quaint little song. And this was the song:—

"Sing-song! Don't be long!
Wistful, Wistful, come and play!
Sing-song! It's very wrong
To stay and stay and stay away!
The world is much too nice a place
To make you pull so long a face;
It's full of people being kind,
And full of flowers for you to find;
There's heaps of folks for you to tease
And all the naughtiness you please;
To sulk is surely waste of time
When all those trees are yours to climb!
Ting-a-ring! Make haste, King!

I've something really nice to say;
Ting-a-ring! A proper King
Would not make me sing all day!"

King Wistful thrilled all over with excitement. Was something really going to happen at last? He had hardly time to think, however, before the little singer came out of the wood into the open. She wore a clean white pinafore, and on her head was a large white sunbonnet, and under the sunbonnet were two of the brightest brown eyes the King had ever seen. He stepped down the hill towards her, wondering how anything so pretty and so merry could have come into his kingdom; and at the same instant the little girl saw the King and came running up the hill towards him, so it was not long before they stood together, hand in hand, half-way down the hillside.

"Where did you come from and who are you and how long have you been here?" asked the King, breathlessly.

"I am Eyebright, of course," answered the little girl, smiling; "and I've been here always."

"Who taught you to sing that song about me?" demanded the King.

"The magician," answered Eyebright; "and he told me to sing it every day until you came. But you have been a long time coming!"

"I'm very sorry," replied his Majesty, apologetically; "you see, the magician did not tell me to come. In fact, I don't even know who the magician is."

"Are you not the King, then?" asked Eyebright, opening her great brown eyes as wide as they would go.

The little King felt it was hardly necessary to answer this; but he set his heels together and took off his crown and made her the best bow he had learned at his dancing-class, just to show beyond any doubt that he was the King. Eyebright still looked a little doubtful.

"Then how is it that you do not know the magician?" she asked him. "What is the use of being King, if you do not know everybody who lives in your kingdom?"

"It isn't any use; I never said I wanted to be King, did I?" said his Majesty, a little crossly. It was not pleasant to find that somebody else, and only a little girl in a sunbonnet, knew more about his kingdom than he did.

"What a very funny boy you are!" remarked Eyebright, without noticing his crossness. "I always thought it must be so splendid to be a King, and to have a banquet whenever you like, and never to go out without a procession, and to wear a crown instead of a sunbonnet, and—"

"That's all you know about it," interrupted the King, somewhat impolitely. "There aren't any banquets; and when there are, you only have stupid things with long names to eat, and you never know whether to eat them with a fork or a spoon, and it's always wrong whichever you do. And if you ask for jumbles or chocolate creams or plum-cake, you're told you mustn't spoil your dinner. And all the procession you ever get is a procession of nurses, who won't even let you step in a puddle if you want to!"

"Dear me," said Eyebright, "you're no better off than a little boy in an ordinary nursery!"

The little King drew himself up on tiptoe with great dignity. "Some of your remarks are most foolish," he said. "You forget that I have a kingdom of my own as well as a nursery. To be sure," he added sadly, "it is not much to boast of, for it is a very stupid kingdom, and nothing nice ever happens in it."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Eyebright. "Your kingdom is the nicest kingdom in the whole world!"

King Wistful had managed to keep his temper so far, but this was more than he could bear. "Rubbish!" he cried, completely forgetting his royal manners. "You come up the hill with me, and I'll show you what a stupid kingdom it is."

So they raced up to the top of the hill and looked down at the five round islands in a row. "There!" said King Wistful. "Did you ever see anything so dull?"

The little girl shook her head. "I think it is all as pretty as it can be," she said. "Look how the sun glints on the cornfields, and see the great red and blue patches of flowers—"

"But they're always the same flowers," complained his Majesty, yawning.

"They're supposed to be the same flowers, but they never are," answered Eyebright. "If you were to pick them—"

"Kings never pick flowers," he replied haughtily.

"Perhaps that is why you know so little about them," retorted Eyebright; and his Majesty began to feel he was not getting the best of it.

"Anyhow," he continued hastily, "you must own that the sea never changes."

"Oh!" said Eyebright; "that is because you have not learned the sea properly. It has ever so many different faces, and ever so many different voices, too."

The King turned and stared at her. "Are you a witch?" he asked wonderingly.

"No!" laughed Eyebright, merrily. "If I were, I would make you see things right instead of wrong." Then she suddenly scampered down the hill again. "Come

along, quick!" she cried. "We'll go and ask the magician to disenchant you."

King Wistful had to run his hardest to catch her, for the little girl in the sunbonnet certainly knew how to put one foot in front of the other. But then, a sunbonnet is not so apt to tumble off a person's head as a crown, and that makes all the difference in a running race.

"Where does the magician live?" he panted, when he came up with her.

"In the middle island," she answered. "We'll find the boat and follow the river down to the sea." She plunged into the wood as she spoke, and threaded her way through the slender young trees, with his Majesty close at her heels. Sometimes the bracken was as tall as she was, but the boy behind could always see the sunbonnet bobbing up and down just ahead of him, and he followed it until they came out at the other side of the wood and found themselves on the banks of a charming little river. A small round boat like a tub, lined with pink rose-leaves, was waiting for them; and into this they both jumped.

"Oh, oh!" cried Eyebright, jumping up and down with delight. "The fairies are out to-day! Look at them—the purple ones in the loosestrife, and the pink and white ones in the comfrey, and—"

"You'll upset the boat if you don't sit still," interrupted the King, who felt cross because he could not see the fairies. "Let me have the oars and I'll take you down the stream."

"You need not do anything of the sort," said Eyebright; "for this is the boat the magician gave me, and it always takes you wherever you want to go."

So they just sat in the sunshine and floated lazily along, and they dabbled their hands in the water and made their sleeves as wet as they pleased, and they caught at the branches above as they passed under them, and they leaned over the side and stretched after everything that grew out of reach; and, in short, if they had not been in a fairy boat, it is very certain that they would have tumbled into the water several times before they reached their journey's end. Presently, the river widened out into the big calm sea; and after that, the boat quickened its speed and took them across to the middle island in no time at all, for the fairies know well enough that nobody wants to dawdle about in an open sea, where there are no tadpoles to catch and no trees that sweep their branches down to meet the water.

When the boat stopped, they found themselves on the edge of a shore covered with sea-lilac and yellow poppies, and wonderful shells that sang without being put to any one's ear; and just a little way along the beach was the magician's cave. There was no doubt about its being the right cave, for over the door of it was written in square acid tablets: "This is the magician's cave." Besides, the

whole cave was dug out of a solid almond rock; and of course, any other person's cave would have been made of plain rock without any almonds in it.

"Come along," said Eyebright; and the two children walked up the beach and knocked at the magician's door and went in.

Some people might think that a cave on the sea-shore would be full of draughts and jellyfish and wet shrimps; but this particular cave was just like the nicest room that ever belonged to a castle-in-the-air. The wonder of it was, that whoever went into it found the very things he had never had and always wanted, and none of the things that he had always had and never wanted. So Eyebright immediately found a beautiful story-book, with a coloured picture on every page, and all the sad stories squeezed between the happy stories, so that no one who read it could ever cry for long at a time; while the King found the inside of a clock waiting to be picked to pieces, and an open pocket-knife with a bit of firewood lying handy, and a full-rigged schooner ready to be sailed. And they both saw the dear old magician, sitting in his arm-chair and smiling at them.

He was dressed in a long cloak, that always began by being a green cloak but changed every other minute to a different colour, according to the mood the magician was in; and as he was always in a nice mood, whether it was a sad or a merry one, his cloak always managed to be a nice colour. On his head was a high pointed hat, with crackers sticking out of it and a pattern worked all over it in caramels and preserved cherries; and he wore furry foxgloves on his hands to keep them warm, because he was not so young as he used to be. He had been practising as a magician for over a thousand years, but he did not look very old, for all that; he was what might be called pleasantly old, for he had soft white hair and a curly white beard and a pink complexion like a school-boy's. That is how a magician grows old when he has always been a jolly magician.

Eyebright ran straight up to him and climbed on his knee and hugged him. "I've brought the King to see you," she announced; "and we want you to be a nice, kind, lovely magician and help him to be disenchanting."

The magician stood up and shook hands with the King, just to make him feel at home; and the boy did not feel shy another minute, and quite forgot that he had never paid a visit before without a procession of nurses to look after him.

"You are very good children to call on me at tea-time," said the magician. "If there is one thing more than another that makes me feel the ache in my bones, it is having tea by myself. Now, would you like to have it on the floor, or shall I call up a table?"

The King, who had had his meals on a table all his life, voted for the floor; but when Eyebright said it would be more fun to see what would happen if they chose the table, he had to own that perhaps she was right. What happened was

very simple: the magician just stamped on the floor, and a neat little table, covered with a nice white cloth, walked in at the door like any person and took up its position in the middle of the floor.

"Well!" exclaimed Eyebright; "I never knew tables could walk, before!"

"What do you suppose they have four legs for?" asked the magician, smiling.

"My nursery table does not walk," observed the little King.

"Ah," said the magician, wisely, "some tables do not know how to put two and two together. Now for some chairs!"

He stamped on the floor again, and two little arm-chairs bustled into the room as fast as their fat little legs would carry them. "You must excuse their being in such a hurry," said the magician; "they have been playing at musical chairs all their lives, you see. Now, while you are laying the table, I will boil the kettle. Crockery in the left-hand cupboard, and eatables in the right-hand cupboard!"

So the magician set to work and lighted the fire with peppermint-sticks, and the two children opened the doors of his wonderful cupboards. The crockery in the left-hand cupboard was the right sort of crockery, for none of it matched; so it did not take a minute to find a small pink cup and a green saucer for Eyebright, and a big blue cup and a red saucer for the magician, and a nice purple mug without any saucer at all for King Wistful. As for the right-hand cupboard, the little King was overjoyed when he found it stocked with jumbles and chocolate creams and plum-cake. "I am glad," he said with a sigh of relief, "that you don't keep seed-cake in your cupboard. Seed-cake always reminds me of eleven o'clock in the morning."

"Ah," said the magician, "the wymps saw to that, when they filled my cupboard for me, centuries ago. There's never any bread-and-butter in it, either—until you've had as much plum-cake as you can eat."

That was a delightful tea-party. The magician did not mind in the least when they made polite remarks about the food and told him his jumbles might have been kept a little longer with advantage, or that his chocolate creams were not quite so soft as some they had known. But they hastened to add that his tea was the nicest tea they had ever tasted because it had only a grown-up amount of milk in it, so he would have been rather a cross magician if he had minded. Nor did he raise any objection when they walked about in the middle of tea and took a look at the picture-book, or whittled away the piece of firewood, or danced round the cave and shouted because everything was so nice. And after tea there were all the magician's treasures to be turned out of odd nooks and corners and left about on the floor, and all his new quill pens to be tried, and his clean sheets of note-paper to be scribbled over. And when they were tired of exploring the

cave and had eaten as much plum-cake as they wanted, the magician saw it was the right moment to begin telling them really true stories; and as he was a magician, of course his true stories were all fairy stories, which, as every one knows, are the only true stories in the world worth believing. But even the stories came to an end at last, and then both the children remembered at once why they had come to see the magician.

"Well, what can I do for you?" he asked, before they had time to say anything; for, truly, he would not have been a magician at all if he had not known what they were thinking about. He smiled so encouragingly that the little King answered him at once.



"It's like this," he began, "there's something wrong with the way I see things."

"Of course there is," said the magician: "the wymps threw dust in your eyes when you were a baby; and you cannot expect to see things in the same light as other people when the wymps have once thrown dust in your eyes."

"Why did they throw dust in my eyes?" asked little King Wistful.

"Usual reason," answered the magician, briefly. "They were not asked to your christening, that's all. If people will persist in leaving the wymps out when they give a party, they must take the consequences. However, as you were not to blame in the matter, the wymps would be the first to own that you ought not to be bewymped any longer. The best thing you can do is to go up to Wympland yourself and ask them to take away the spell."

The little King looked at Eyebright and hesitated. "It is a long way to go all alone," he remarked; and Eyebright immediately stepped up to him and took his hand.

"I'll come with you," she said; "I've always longed to go to the other side of the sun. How are we to get there, magician?"

"Well," answered the magician, "the usual way is to climb up a sunbeam, but that's not very quick and sunbeams are apt to be slippery in the dry weather. Shall I send you up in a flash of lightning or on the spur of a lark?"

"Spur of a lark!" echoed the King. "You mean on the spur of a moment, don't you?"

"Not a bit of it," answered the magician; "you'd never get up to Wympland on the spur of anything but a lark, I can tell you! You have to get up there very early in any case, if you want to be even with the wymps; so the best way is to

rise with the lark. However, as it is getting rather late in the day for larks, I had better send you up in a lightning flash. Will you manage it alone, or shall I send a conductor with it?"

"Would the conductor show us the way?" asked Eyebright.

"Dear me, no," said the magician. "Lightning conductors never show anything but the stupidity of some people. Perhaps you'd better have the lightning without a conductor; so stand on one side, while I pick you out a nice quiet flash without any thunder hanging to it."

He took down a large sack, labelled Storms, from the shelf, untied the top and plunged his head into it. Eyebright stole a little closer to the King than before and hoped that nothing would go off with a bang.

"I say," said his Majesty, putting his arm round her, "it strikes me—"

"That is impossible," interrupted the magician in a stuffy voice from the middle of the sack, "for I've got it in both hands, and it isn't going to strike anybody so long as you treat it kindly. Now, off you go in a flash!"

And off they did go in something, though they never knew what it was, for they had no time to see anything before they found themselves dropped with a thud on the other side of the sun. For a moment or two they just lay where they had fallen without moving; then they sat up and rubbed their eyes and looked round.

"Oh!" exclaimed Eyebright, clasping her hands tight; "I had no idea it was like this."

Of course Eyebright knew no more about Wympland than she had learned in her geography lessons, and we all know how little geography books ever tell us about the really nice places in the world. So, although she knew as well as any other little girl that Wympland has no physical features and its inhabitants have no occupation, that its climate is dull and foggy and its government is a sleeping monarchy, she was not in the least prepared for what she did see.

"Well," said a voice somewhere near, "what do you think of it?"

Just in front of them a wymp was standing on his head, which is a wymp's favourite way of resting his legs. He seemed to expect an answer, so the King did his best to think of one that should be both polite and truthful. As a matter of fact, he did not think much of Wympland at all.

"It—it is rather full of fog, isn't it?" he began, a little nervously.

The wymp looked distinctly hurt; but before he had time to get angry Eyebright put things right in her quiet little way.

"I don't think it is yellow fog," she said; "it is more like dull sunshine."

The wymp fairly wymped when he heard this.

"You've hit it!" he cried in a delighted tone; "that's what it is really. It's the folks from the front of the sun who call it yellow fog; they're blinded by their own sunshine, they are. This is the back of the sun, you see, and the sunshine naturally loses a bit of its polish by the time it has worked through."

"I think I like bright sunshine best," observed the King.

"That is absurd!" said the wymp. "Why, you can't look at it without blinking, to begin with. In Wympland you get all the advantages of the sun and none of the drawbacks,—no sunblinds or sunstrokes or sunspots! You must be a stupid boy if you can't see that!"

"It is your fault, not mine," answered the King boldly; "you shouldn't have thrown dust in my eyes if you wanted me to see Wympland in the right light!"

The wymp turned several somersaults to show his amazement at the King's words, and finally stood thoughtfully on one leg.

"That's serious," he said. "We didn't know you'd ever come up here, or we shouldn't have done it. However, it can't be helped now, so you'd better go back again. It doesn't matter if you do see things wrong—at the front of the sun."

"But it does matter!" they both exclaimed; "and that's why we want you to take away the spell, please."

The wymp stood on his head again and shook it from side to side, which no one but a wymp could have done, considering the awkwardness of the position. "There's only one thing to be done," he said at last. "You must exchange eyes."

They stared at the wymp and then at each other. The little King began to think busily, but Eyebright spoke without thinking at all.

"Very well," she said. "How is it to be done?"

"Quite easy," answered the wymp, cheerfully. "All you've got to do is to wish with all your might to have the King's eyes instead of your own, and there you are!"

At that moment the King finished his thinking. "Stop!" he shouted. "If I take her eyes away, she will always see things wrong!"

But the King had spoken too late. Eyebright had already wished with all her might, and her eyes had turned as blue as deep water while his Majesty's were round and large and brown.

"What fun!" she cried, laughing happily. "Isn't it a nice change to have somebody else's eyes?"

The little King, however, was far too furious to listen to her.

"Stand up and let me knock you down!" he cried, shaking his fist at the wymp.

"Look what you have done. She will see things wrong to the end of her days!"

"Don't be a foolish little boy," said the wymp, calmly. "Take her home and try to see things right yourself."

The King certainly did not take her home, nor himself either; but it is the truth that they both found themselves, the very next minute, standing on the top of the small green hillock and looking down at the kingdom of the Monotonous Isles.

"Hurrah!" shouted King Wistful, waving his crown joyfully. "What a beautiful kingdom I've got! Look how the sun glints on the cornfields, and see the great red and blue patches of flowers! Don't you think it is a beautiful kingdom?" he added, turning to the little girl in the sunbonnet.

Eyebright was distinctly puzzled. She thought she only saw five round islands in a row. But, of course, it was impossible that the King should be mistaken. So she looked once more over the kingdom of the Monotonous Isles and then back at the anxious face of the little King.

"Yes," she said softly, "it is, as you say, a beautiful kingdom." Then she ran down the hill and disappeared among the slender trees of the baby wood, and little King Wistful went home to bed.

There is a Queen now as well as a King of the Monotonous Isles. She has black hair and blue eyes, and she wears a crown instead of a sunbonnet, and she quite agrees with the King whenever he tells her how beautiful their kingdom is. And if this should seem remarkable to some people, it need only be remembered that the Queen sees everything with the King's eyes.

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